

A progressive first from a conservative think tank

The Shalem Center is on the road to achieving one of its original ambitions – opening Israel's only liberal arts college

• ELLIOT JAGER

Ask Martin Kramer if spearheading the country's first liberal arts college isn't a daunting – maybe unachievable – goal in these hard times, and he invokes the name of his old friend Prof. Zvi Yavetz.

The venerable historian, Kramer tells me, was part of a small group of scholars who helped to found Tel Aviv University, ex nihilo, in the 1950s. They gave their lectures in makeshift classrooms in Abu Kabir. As Kramer heard it, the vision of creating a world-class university, on a par with the already-existing Hebrew University of Jerusalem, that would teach everything from music to physics was hashed out by Yavetz and his contemporaries as they worked away “in miserable shacks.” Kramer quotes Yavetz: “Students who were later to become great professors sat on first graders’ chairs.”

Relative to Yavetz, Kramer has certain advantages. All he is trying to do is bring to fruition a small liberal arts college that, if everything goes according to plan, will one day have an enrollment of 1,000 students. And he is doing it at the behest of Jerusalem's powerhouse Shalem Center.

EJ: Where did the idea of a college come from?

Kramer: The idea has been an aspiration of Shalem since the center's inception. In a way, the Shalem Center was the interim framework established until a kind of critical mass and reputation were achieved that would allow this step.

THE 55-year-old president-designate of Shalem College, who spent 25 years at Tel Aviv University as a scholar of Middle East Studies, has made a name for himself outside academia as well, with the publication of *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* – a book which argued that many Middle East departments on US campuses had abandoned serious scholarship to become trendy bastions of

shoddy research and anti-Western bias.

When Edward Said, the late Columbia University English professor who became an indefatigable advocate of the Palestinian Arab cause, challenged the scholarship of Bernard Lewis, Kramer's dissertation adviser and the doyen of Western Middle East experts, Kramer went on the offensive. He initiated a campaign to depoliticize and re-professionalize university Middle East Studies departments wherever they had fallen under the ideological sway of Said's followers.

A native of Silver Spring, Maryland, Kramer first visited Israel on a summer program in 1970. He returned to study at Tel Aviv University between 1971 and 1973 where Itamar Rabinovich – who went on to become TAU president – took him under his wing. Kramer returned to the States to complete his BA at Princeton, an MA at Columbia and a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies back at Princeton.

The Shalem-Princeton connection runs deep. The center was founded 15 years ago by a group of Princetonians, among them Yoram Hazony and Daniel Polisar. Over the years other Princeton grads, including Michael Oren – and now Kramer – gravitated to Shalem. Original financial backing for Shalem came from philanthropists Ronald Lauder and the late Zalman Bernstein. The Tikvah Fund, Bernstein's creation, remains the center's leading supporter.

Separately, Sheldon Adelson provided initial support for Natan Sharansky's institute within Shalem.

By 1981, Kramer had made aliya and, with backing from Rabinovich, joined the TAU faculty. He spent 25 years at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, eventually becoming its director. Kramer has been a visiting scholar at Harvard, Brandeis, Cornell and other prestigious institutions abroad. He is also a former editor of the *Middle East Quarterly* and maintains

a long-standing relationship with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Kramer lives in Ra'anana with his wife of 31 years, Sandra, a physical therapist whom he first met in high school – “though we didn't start dating until much later,” he said. The couple has three children.

Kramer and I met over a lunch of bagels and tuna at the Shalem Center's posh offices in Jerusalem's trendy Emek Refaim neighborhood. Joining us was Cambridge-educated Suzanne Balaban, Shalem's vice president for communications.





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- Martin Kramer

WHEN HE first came to Tel Aviv University in the early '70s, Kramer reminisced, Middle East specialists were held in especially high esteem.

"In those days, you didn't have Israeli academics, journalists and diplomats traveling about the Arab world," he said. Scholars who were fluent in Arabic – he named Shimon Shamir, Rabinovich and Haim Shaked as examples – became iconic figures. Israeli newspapers featured their interpretations of events in the Arab world.

Paradoxically, Kramer lamented, the ability of Israeli Middle East experts to illuminate what was happening in Arab and Muslim civilization

diminished even as more of them began to travel to neighboring countries – in part because the newer generation of experts was more narrowly educated. Remedying this now-endemic pedagogical deficiency is one of the motivations driving Shalem College.

"We are not talking about creating an *alternative* education system," Kramer explained, "but of providing an additional option."

He cited his personal experience: "In my first year at Tel Aviv University, with a dual major in Middle Eastern Studies and East Africa, I had no Jewish history, no Western philosophy; I studied

Swahili and I studied Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia – which were required courses. Later, when I arrived in Princeton, I discovered my cohorts had spent this time *broadening* their knowledge base."

SIMILARLY, an often myopic educational experience, Kramer argued, has created a generation of Israeli leaders who may know *how* to get things done, but have forgotten why they should bother.

In contrast, the country's founding generation had a more rounded intellectual experience and



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was thus well-versed in Jewish and world history, said Kramer. "Go visit David Ben-Gurion's personal library in Tel Aviv and you can get an idea of the range of his knowledge and reading. Israelis were being called upon to make sacrifices. And they needed leaders who could explain where they had been and where they were going."

Kramer paused and unfolded a handwritten quotation that he'd copied from an interview given by former prime minister Ehud Olmert to *Haaretz* and read it to me: "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights [among Palestinians in Judea and Samaria], then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished."

Kramer appeared quietly incensed. He said, "I thought to myself, well, certainly the early Zionist leaders knew that there was a tremendous demographic disadvantage. They were very much tilting against reality on the ground, and yet they didn't despair. Because they knew something, I think, through their reading of history that perhaps this particular leader didn't know. That history is not a straight line."

He refolded the paper.

Israel's founders "would have rejected the idea that our fate is a function of whether the Palestinian Arabs organize a state. 'If they fail, we're finished.' Our founders had an understanding of the twists and turns of world and of Jewish history, and in the ways they intersected, and in the unexpected opportunities that history provides."

EJ: But is Olmert wrong?

Kramer: His more linear reading comes from a shallower understanding of the human condition. Maybe it makes sense to a lawyer, but I think leadership requires people who are prepared to see the opportunities and not to see only the dead ends.

EJ: And with the new liberal arts college, you are setting out to create a cadre of future leaders who see opportunities; a new elite that puts the collective good first?

Kramer: That is a fair characterization.

For the challenges ahead, said Kramer, Israel needs a skilled military, a strong economic base and highly trained technocrats. Leaders of Israel's hi-tech sector recognized the need to produce thousands of engineers a year, Kramer noted, "and the system geared up to do just that."

"But where are we going to produce that cadre of 100, 150, 250 people a year with a holistic view, who will be prepared for any eventuality and the sense of responsibility in going forward?" Kramer asked.

"I am a great admirer of Israel's universities," he allowed. But they are focused, he said, on competing to enter the rankings of the top 50 universities in the world. That leads them to bolster the hard sciences and emphasize faculty research while essentially demoting the humanities and teaching, which count for less in rankings.

With the energies of university administrations invested elsewhere, "there tends to be less attention paid to what goes on in the humanities and social sciences until someone in one of the departments writes an outrageous op-ed in some American newspaper that

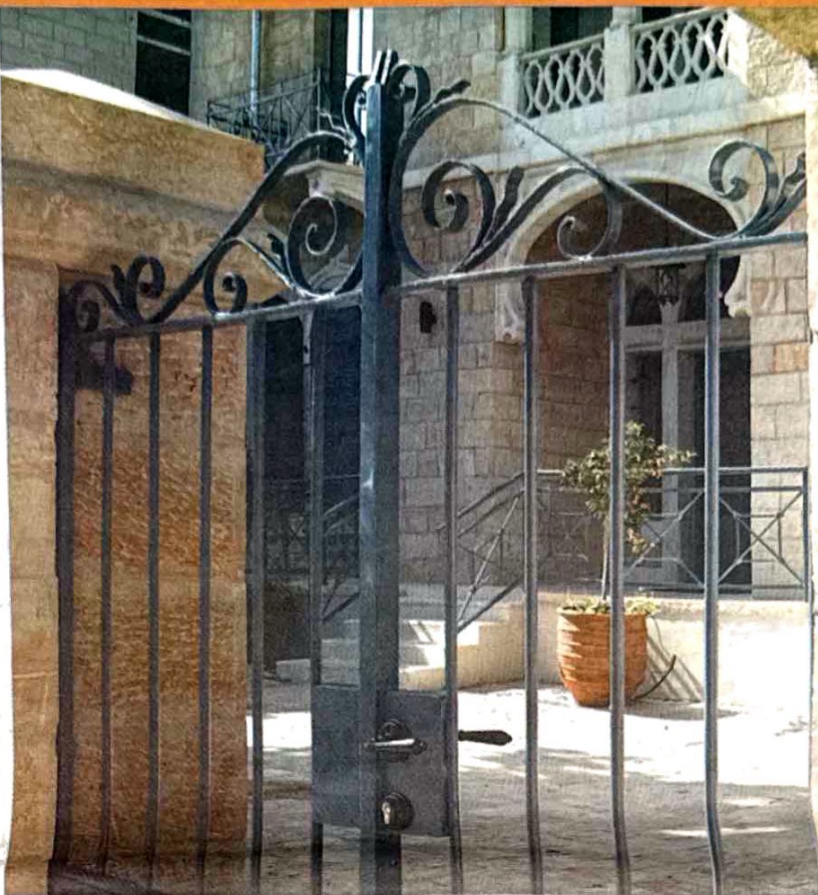
casts Israel in a bad light and attracts negative attention onto their university," said Kramer.

TO PREPARE its students for leadership, Kramer told me, Shalem College will take a holistic approach in its curriculum and admissions policies. The language of instruction will be Hebrew, though students will be expected to be articulate in English, too. Kramer is not certain whether applicants will need to take the dreaded psychometric exam, but he's adamant that it will not be the primary selection criterion: "We will look at the applicant's entire record." Following the US model, about two-thirds of the student body will receive some form of scholarship.

Whether they specialize in Middle East Studies or in a combined program in philosophy, political theory and religion—other majors will be added over time—all students will be expected to master the same core curriculum that Kramer considers essential for a "learned person" aspiring to leadership of this country. It will run the gamut from Plato to Keynes, from the Hebrew Bible to Hobbes.

Though Israeli universities are now also adopting the core-courses principle into their existing curriculum, Kramer insisted that Shalem's requirements would be the "most extensive and comprehensive" in the country. Their content "will also be unique, and reflect what Shalem values in Jewish and other traditions."

To accomplish its mission, the college will be demanding the devotion of its enrollees for four years, compared to the usual three-year commitment required of undergraduates at Israeli universities.



EJ: To get off the ground, Shalem College will need to be accredited by The Israel Council for Higher Education. You are proposing to create an unabashedly Zionist institution. Israel's intelligentsia is riddled with post-Zionists. Do you anticipate any problems?

Kramer: Ours is not a political project that is in some way different from the enterprise of the State of Israel itself. I was struck that the president of Ben-Gurion University recently felt it necessary to assert that her institution is "proudly Zionist." So I take it that it will not be counted as a strike against us that we see ourselves as a Zionist institution, too.

EJ: But might not the college be seen as too right-wing?

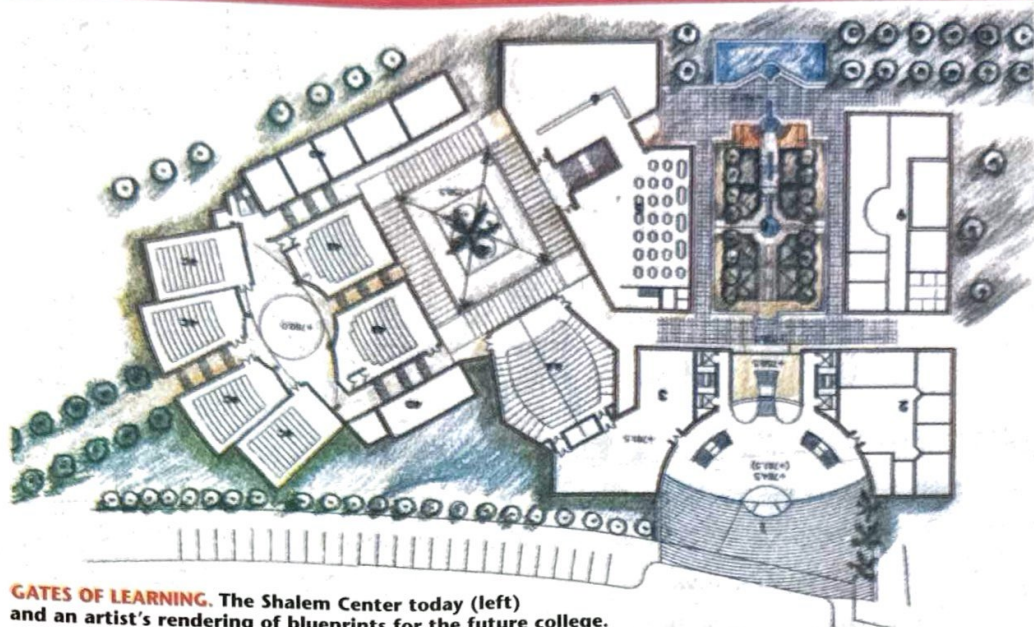
Kramer: There is no doubt that various departments in various Israeli universities are not in line with the country's mainstream. But I think we are where the mainstream is in Israel today. Zionism isn't Left or Right. It's a commitment to Israel as the national home of the Jewish people. We plan to bring together outstanding scholars who share that commitment.

KRAMER'S vision is of a college that puts teaching "first and foremost." Faculty will be top-notch, he promised, but the publish-or-perish obsession that dominates research universities will be banished from Shalem.

"The heart of any educational institution is its faculty. It's not the buildings. The students graduate. But what gives a university or college its flavor is the faculty. We have a core of people who will be making appointments, who have shared values and who know how to respect the best scholarship," said Kramer.

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GATES OF LEARNING. The Shalem Center today (left) and an artist's rendering of blueprints for the future college.



SCHOLAR AND SOUL. 'We've seen that value-free scholarship has infiltrated from the sciences into the humanities and social sciences, where it is corrosive.'

(Ariel Jerolimski)

EJ: Shared values?

Kramer: We've seen that value-free scholarship has infiltrated from the sciences – where it makes some sense – into the humanities and social sciences, where it is corrosive. Shalem will be looking for faculty whose values commit them to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel – the vessel for Jewish survival.

Yet this will not be a school for the indoctrination of Zionism. When you look at our curriculum, you see that we don't actually come to the history of Israel until the second semester of the fourth year. Why? Because we think that the Zionist conclusion emerges only from the full reading of Jewish history and Western history and philosophy.

EJ: Will you be inviting scholars who disagree with the Shalem worldview to join the faculty?

Here **Balaban** interjected. "When I joined Shalem, I noticed that there was a glass door. On one side sat Natan Sharansky and Moshe Ya'alon, and on the other sat Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren. They profoundly disagreed over the Gaza disengagement. But they were all welcome under our roof. A.B. Yehoshua has written for Shalem publications. Our culture is one of collegiality even when there is disagreement. There aren't many intellectual havens like that."

Kramer: I would note, too, that Yosef Gorny of Tel Aviv University, my former colleague, is chair of the appointments committee of our academic council. He's an iconic figure in Labor Zionism and its historiography.

Every institution molds its faculty. Not long ago, Columbia University established a chair in Israel studies. Two leading Palestinians were put on the search committee. Why? Because it was

understood that while there could be a chair in Israel Studies at Columbia, it could not be held by someone who would negate the Palestinian narrative.

EJ: Would you say that's outrageous?

Kramer: I would say that is Columbia. Shalem College, I can assure you, will not become yet another home to scholars who have made their reputations by negating the Zionist and Israeli narrative.

KRAMER hopes Shalem's graduates will become leaders in journalism, politics, academia, the security establishment and the business world – "whatever their choice, they will be equipped well beyond their cohorts."

Balaban sees the college's role as a form of continued nation-building.

"The swamps have been drained," she said. "But in terms of the intellectual infrastructure of the country, there is still much to be done."

EJ: Where is the money for the college coming from?

Kramer: Well, the money will not come from the State of Israel. We will not ask for the usual per-student allocation. It will come from private sources in America, Europe and Israel.

EJ: Want to name names?

Kramer: We will name names when donors permit us to do so. We have a number of donors at a million dollars and above – including the Klarman family foundation of Boston and George and Pamela Rohr of New York.

EJ: But are you confident you'll have enough money?

Kramer: Yes, once we receive accreditation from Israel's Council For Higher Education. We expect to open our doors in 2012. We are just launching a campaign which will take us through our first four years of college operations and also help create an endowment. We are obviously closer to the beginning than the end. I have absolute and total confidence this will happen.

EJ: Who is the father of the liberal arts college idea?

Kramer and Balaban agreed that the concept should be credited to Hazony, Polisar, Ofir Haiyry and Josh Weinstein.

SHALEM has always operated on the battleground of ideas, melding Diaspora creativity and money with an Israeli stubbornness that, said Kramer, does not accept failure as an option. It is this track record, Kramer told me, that persuaded him to take on an assignment that seeks a different path for Israeli higher education.